All stories complete

Issue 1

Pulp Vortex StoryMagazine

XENO-DIPLOMACY

An Ovi Publication

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editorial

Welcome to Ovi's Pulp Vortex eMagazine.

You're reading the first issue of a new kind of eMagazine. One that digs its heels into the grimy, beautiful, terrifying intersection where the human throat meets the alien claw. We don't do sterile holograms and logical Vulcan handshakes here. In these pages, first contact isn't a diplomatic tea ceremony. It's a hostage crisis with ...humour!

Pulp science fiction was never about clean uniforms or prime directives. It was about sweat, grit and the desperate, ugly gamble of survival. And so, for our debut, we've assembled five stories that understand this truth the first word between worlds is always a loaded gun.

We launch with The Gilded Ultimatum, where a shattered crystal ambassador and a ticking clock force a lone human to weaponize mistranslation itself. Every wrong syllable cracks a continent.

Then, brace yourself for Teeth of the Silent King, a nightmare of consensual agony. Negotiator Vale walks a gauntlet of psychic traps, because on a living planet, pain is the only language of peace.

In The Breath-Tax of Ghorn, we turn diplomacy into organ-legging. A dying soldier trades his own lungs for star maps, then rigs the deal to explode. It's a race against respiratory failure and stellar collapse. We promise you've never read a trade negotiation like this.

Romance gets a razor-sharp edge in A Kiss for the Razor-Swarm. Disgraced, desperate, and dangerously seductive, our anti-hero must woo a trillion-strong insect queen by surviving her lethal mating rituals. Think James Bond meets Kafka meets beehive.

Finally, we close with The Silence Between Shots. On a neutral asteroid, a bullet is a punctuation mark. After every trigger pull, the truth. But when a translator realizes the reptilian Xix'thar are lying about their own anatomy, the ceasefire becomes a fuse.

These five stories are our declaration of intent. Ovi P Pulp Vortex isn't here to soothe you. We're here to grab you by the collar, drag you through the razor-wire, and remind you why science fiction was born in the pulps, loud, fast and hungry.

Turn the page. Make the call. And remember, when the aliens answer, don't blink.

Speak carefully. Or don't speak at all.

Thanos Kalamidas

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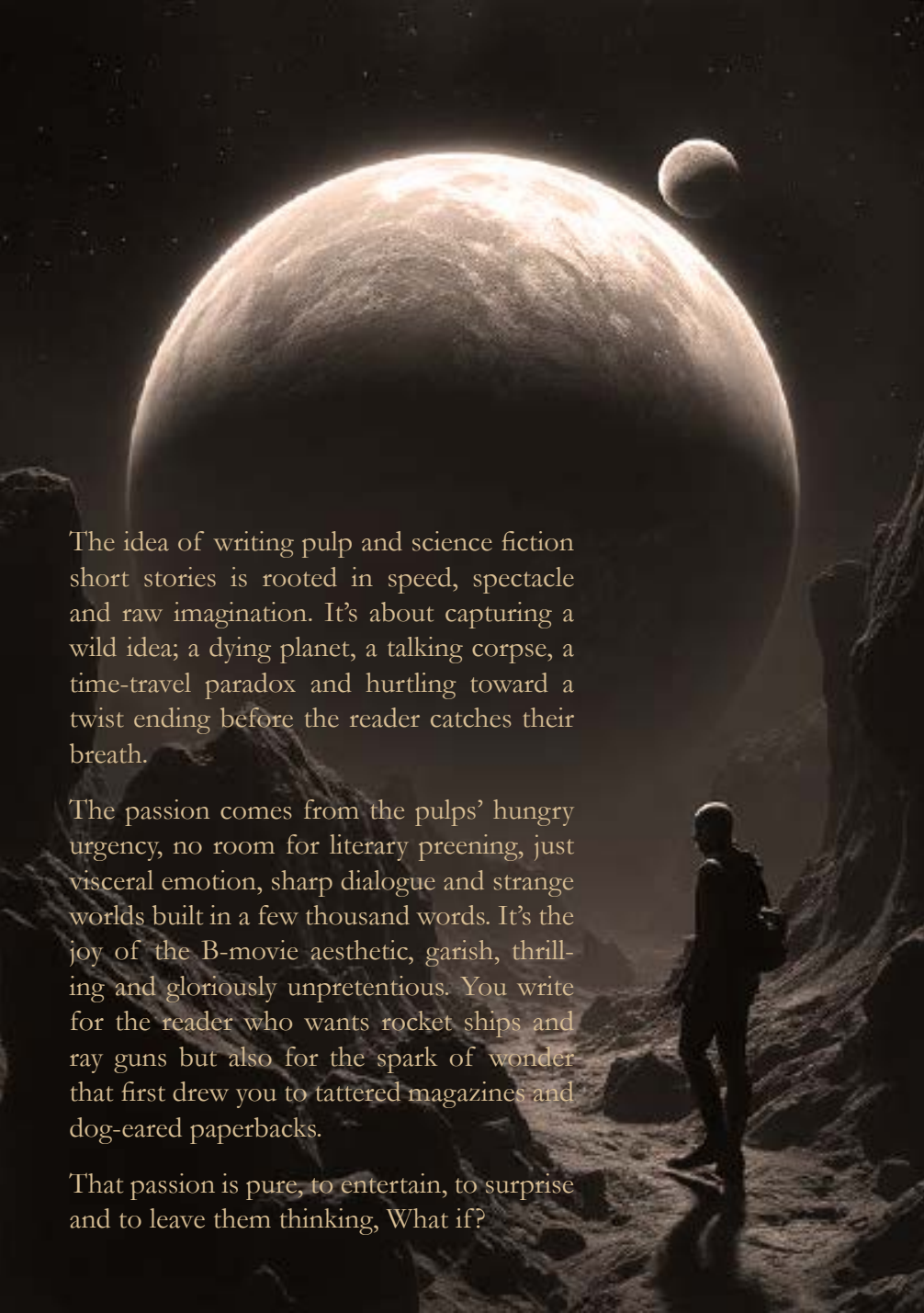

The idea of writing pulp and science fiction short stories is rooted in speed, spectacle and raw imagination. It's about capturing a wild idea; a dying planet, a talking corpse, a time-travel paradox and hurtling toward a twist ending before the reader catches their breath.

The passion comes from the pulps' hungry urgency, no room for literary preening, just visceral emotion, sharp dialogue and strange worlds built in a few thousand words. It's the joy of the B-movie aesthetic, garish, thrilling and gloriously unpretentious. You write for the reader who wants rocket ships and ray guns but also for the spark of wonder that first drew you to tattered magazines and dog-eared paperbacks.

That passion is pure, to entertain, to surprise and to leave them thinking, What if?

Pulp Vortex eMagazine

Pulp Vortex Short Stories
April 2026

Issue 01

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The idea of writing pulp and science fiction short stories is rooted in speed, spectacle and raw imagination. It's about capturing a wild idea; a dying planet, a talking corpse, a time-travel paradox and hurtling toward a twist ending before the reader catches their breath. The passion comes from the pulps' hungry urgency, no room for literary preening, just visceral emotion, sharp dialogue and strange worlds built in a few thousand words. It's the joy of the B-movie aesthetic, garish, thrilling and gloriously unpretentious. You write for the reader who wants rocket ships and ray guns but also for the spark of wonder that first drew you to tattered magazines and dog-eared pa-

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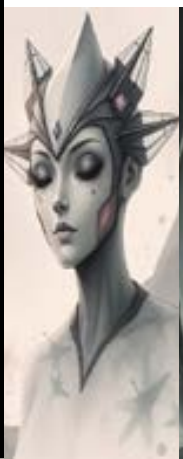

THE HARD WAY OUT

They say you can't negotiate with a being that screams in earthquakes. They're wrong. You can. You just have to be willing to break a few things first. Including yourself.

****

The Vex'ilor ambassador resembled a chandelier that had been designed by a committee of geometry enthusiasts who'd never quite forgiven the universe for inventing soft curves. It stood ...no ...leaned, in the center of the Council Chamber aboard the Terran vessel 'Carl Sagan's Revenge', its crystalline body fracturing the light into spectrums that hurt to look at. Each of its seven primary facets pulsed with a slow, rhythmic luminescence, like a heartbeat made of trapped lightning.

Lieutenant Mira Kessler, linguist third class and the only human within fifty light-years who'd voluntarily spent six months learning to pronounce the glottal stop that sounded like a wine glass being tortured, extended her hand in the traditional human greeting. The gesture had been cleared by four different xenocultural attachés, three diplomatic oversight committees, and one extremely nervous admiral who'd made the sign of the cross despite being a confirmed atheist.

"On behalf of the United Nations of Earth," Mira said, her voice steady despite the sweat trickling down her spine, "I welcome you to..."

She stepped on a loose deck plate.

The 'Revenge' was a twenty-year-old frigate held together by rivets and regret. The plate tilted. Mira tilted. Her outstretched hand, instead of making graceful contact with the Vex'ilor's primary sensory cluster, punched straight through it.

The sound was not a crack. It was a scream, a harmonic shriek that resonated through the deck plating and made every bulkhead in the ship ring like a funeral bell. Ambassador Shard-of-Silence (the name was a poetic translation; the literal one was more like "That-Which-Is-Broken-In-A-Beautiful-Way") exploded into approximately fourteen thousand pieces. They glittered in the recycled air like a snowglobe full of razors.

Mira stood frozen, her hand still extended into empty space, her knuckles dusted with what looked suspiciously like diamond powder.

Silence. Then the ship's AI, which had the emotional intelligence of a brick, announced: "Seismic anomaly detected. Origin point: this chamber. Magnitude: equivalent to 4.2 on the Richter scale. Repeat: seismic anomaly..."

"Shut up," Mira whispered.

The Vex'ilor security attaché, a smaller, angrier cluster of facets that had been hovering behind the ambassador, flared a deep, arterial red. When it spoke, the translation implant in Mira's ear delivered the words in a flat, clinical monotone, which somehow made it worse.

"YOU HAVE EXECUTED OUR AMBASSADOR. BY THE COMPACT OF SEVEN SILENCES, THIS IS AN ACT OF WAR. THE FLEET WILL ARRIVE IN SEVENTY-TWO OF YOUR HOURS. YOUR WORLD WILL BE ATOMIZED. GOOD DAY."

The attaché turned and glided toward the airlock, trailing a wake of disappointed shimmer.

"Wait," Mira said. "Wait, wait, wait. It was an accident. The deck plate—we have regulations,

there's a maintenance log, I can show you the..."

The attaché paused. One facet swivelled back toward her. "ACCIDENT IS NOT A CONCEPT. ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES. CONSEQUENCES HAVE GEOMETRY. YOUR GEOMETRY IS INSUFFICIENT."

It left. The airlock cycled. The remaining Vex'ilor delegation—three lesser functionaries who had been taking notes—followed without a word. Their crystals dimmed as they departed, leaving the chamber cold and dark and full of the glittering remains of a diplomatic career that had lasted exactly four seconds.

Mira sat down heavily on the deck plate that had betrayed her. She picked a shard of ambassador out of her hair. It was warm. She was going to be sick.

* * * * * * * * * *

Captain Jon Varma found her there twenty minutes later. He was a thin, weathered man who looked like he'd been carved from a tree that had been angry at the forest. His uniform was immaculate, which meant he was about to explode.

"Lieutenant," he said, with the careful calm of a man who had already mentally composed the court-martial paperwork, "the Vex'ilor fleet is seventy-two hours out. There are three hundred and seventeen ships. They have weapons that can crack planets like eggs. The President wants to speak with you. The Secretary-General wants to speak with you. My mother wants to speak with you, and she's been dead for six years. Do you have anything to say?"

Mira looked up. Her face was pale, but her eyes were clear. That was the thing about Mira Kessler—she broke things, but she never broke.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I need a warhead."

Varma blinked. "A warhead."

"A big one. Preferably the Mark

IX tactical fusion device we've got in Bay Four. The one with the variable yield."

"That's a planet-cracker."

"Not at minimum yield. At minimum yield, it's a polite cough. I need it for leverage."

Varma knelt down. His voice dropped to a whisper. "You shattered their ambassador. You want to negotiate with a stolen bomb. In a language that, if I recall your last progress report correctly, you described as 'a war crime against the concept of vowels.'"

"I described it as 'a war crime against the concept of vowels and also my sanity,' sir, and that assessment stands. But I've had twenty minutes to think, and here's the thing." She stood up, brushing ambassador dust from her shoulders. "The Vex'ilor don't have a word for 'sorry.' They don't have a word for 'accident.' What they have is a pain-based syntax. Every phoneme is a harmonic frequency that resonates through their crystalline lattice. A mistranslation feels like a cracked rib. A deliberate insult feels like a broken spine. And a genuine apology?" She smiled, and it wasn't a nice smile. "That feels like death. But they respect anyone who's willing to die for a mistake."

Varma stared at her. "You want to apologize by threatening to blow yourself up."

"I want to offer them something they understand." She held up the shard of ambassador still pinched between her fingers. "Pain for pain. But I have to do it in their language, and I have to do it on their ship, and I have to do it in the next," she checked her watch, "seventy-one hours and forty minutes. So if you'll excuse me, sir, I need to go steal a warhead and learn how to pronounce 'I am very sorry about the whole shattering situation, please don't murder my entire species' in a dialect that sounds like a car crash composed by a sadist."

Varma stood up. He was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed, the deep, existential sigh

of a man who had long ago accepted that the universe was run by improvisational chaos.

"Bay Four is code-locked to my biometrics," he said. "I'll meet you there in ten minutes. Don't tell anyone."

"Sir, that's insubordination. And treason."

"Lieutenant, if you save my planet, I'll personally recommend you for a medal. If you fail, we'll all be atomized and no one will care. Either way, I'm not going to be the man who stopped the only person with a bad idea in a universe full of no ideas at all."

He turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing through the empty chamber.

Mira looked down at the shard in her hand. It pulsed once, faintly, as if the ambassador's ghost was trying to say something. She tucked it into her pocket.

"Yeah," she said to the empty room. "I know. I'm sorry."

The deck plate creaked beneath her feet. She made a mental note to never stand on that spot again.

****

The Vex'ilor dreadnought 'Silence Made Manifest' was not designed for creatures with soft parts. The corridors were hexagonal, the air was thin and cold, and the gravity was exactly 1.3 times Earth standard, just enough to make every step feel like you were wading through regret. Mira had been inside for thirty-seven minutes, and her shins already ached from bumping into corners that shouldn't have existed in three-dimensional space.

The warhead was strapped to her back in a modified environmental pack. It was the size of a suitcase, painted cheerful safety orange, and beeping softly at intervals that were definitely not supposed to be that irregular. She'd named it "Ambassador Two" and tried not to think about the half-dozen safety protocols she'd bypassed to make it portable.

She was following the attaché, whose name, she'd learned through frantic research on the shuttle ride over, was Echo-of-Fractures, through a maze of crystalline corridors toward something that the ship's map translated as "Audience Chamber of Judgmental Geometry." The translation implant in her ear was working overtime, and every few seconds it emitted a high-pitched whine that meant "this word does not exist in any language spoken by carbon-based life."

Echo-of-Fractures had not spoken since they'd docked. It simply glided ahead of her, its facets a steady, unfriendly amber. Mira had the distinct impression that it was enjoying her discomfort.

"So," she said, because silence made her nervous and nervous made her chatty, "nice ship. Very angular. Very... pointy. I like what you've done with the lighting. Very moody. Very 'I am about to atomize a planet, but first, ambiance.'"

The attaché did not respond.

"I'm going to keep talking," Mira said. "I want you to know that. I'm going to keep talking until you acknowledge me, because I'm constitutionally incapable of shutting up and also because every time I stop talking, I can hear the warhead beeping, and that's very stressful."

Still nothing.

"Fine. Let's talk about pain. Your language is built on it. Every word, every inflection, every grammatical case, it's all frequency modulation. A high-frequency click in the third octave means 'hello.' A high-frequency click in the fourth octave means 'I would

like to file a formal complaint about your mother.' A harmonic trill at the exact resonant frequency of your target's crystal lattice means 'I love you' if you're a poet, and 'I am about to shatter you into fourteen thousand pieces' if you're a diplomat having a very bad day." She paused. "Which, as it turns out, I am."

Echo-of-Fractures stopped. It turned, slowly, and its facets shifted from amber to a deep, thoughtful violet.

"YOU SPEAK," it said, "LIKE A BROKEN WINDOW."

Mira blinked. "Thank you? I think?"

"IT WAS NOT A COMPLIMENT. BUT IT WAS NOT AN INSULT EITHER. IT WAS AN OBSERVATION. BROKEN WINDOWS ARE HONEST. THEY DO NOT PRETEND TO BE WHOLE."

The attaché resumed gliding. Mira hurried to keep up, the warhead bouncing against her spine.

"So here's the thing," she said. "I come bearing a gift. It's a fusion device. It contains enough explosive yield to, if triggered correctly; produce a harmonic shockwave that will resonate through your ship's crystal lattice at exactly the frequency of a sincere apology. The catch is that I have to be standing next to it when it goes off. The other catch is that I have to pronounce the apology correctly, or the frequency will be wrong, and instead of saying 'I am sorry,' it will say 'I have deliberately chosen to explode your entire fleet as a prank.' And then we'll all die, including me, which would be inconvenient because I have tickets to a concert next month."

The attaché stopped again. This time, it turned and moved closer. Mira could see herself reflected in its facets, seven distorted images of a sweaty, terrified woman holding a bomb.

"YOU ARE EITHER VERY BRAVE," Echo-of-Fractures said, "OR VERY STUPID. I HAVE NOT YET DECIDED WHICH."

"Neither have I," Mira admitted. "But the important thing is that I'm here. And I'm willing to stand in front of your Council of Judgmental Geometry... sorry, 'Audience Chamber of Consensus Harmonics' and pronounce an apology in a language that feels like chewing glass. All I ask is that you listen before you atomize my planet."

The attaché was silent for a long, terrible moment. The warhead beeped. Mira's knees ached. The air smelled like burnt lightning and her own fear.

Then Echo-of-Fractures flared a pale, hesitant green.

"FOLLOW," it said. "THE COUNCIL WILL HEAR YOU. BUT IF YOU PRONOUNCE ONE SYLLABLE INCORRECTLY, THE RESULTING SEISMIC FEEDBACK WILL CRACK THIS SHIP IN HALF. AND WE WILL STILL ATOMIZE YOUR PLANET. JUST SLOWER. TO MAKE A POINT."

Mira swallowed. "Understood."

She followed, and the warhead beeped, and somewhere on Earth, her mother was probably watching the news and wondering why her daughter had chosen a career in "diplomacy" instead of something safe, like accounting.

****

The Audience Chamber of Consensus Harmonics was the size of a cathedral designed by someone who had never forgiven God for inventing right angles. Crystalline pillars rose from the deck like frozen screams, each one vibrating at a different frequency. The seven members of the Council, elder Vex'ilor whose facets were so densely packed that they looked less like individuals and more like living chandeliers, hovered in a semicircle around a central dais. The air hummed with the combined resonance of their thoughts, and Mira's teeth ached in her skull.

She stood on the dais, the warhead at her feet. Echo-of-Fractures had taken a position to her left, its facets now a neutral, watchful gray.

The eldest Council member, a massive, slow-pulsing entity whose name translated as "Memory-of-the-First-Crack" spoke first. Its voice was a low bass rumble that made the deck plates vibrate.

"HUMAN. YOU HAVE COME TO APOLOGIZE FOR THE SHATTERING OF OUR AMBASSADOR. BUT YOU CARRY A WEAPON. EXPLAIN THE GEOMETRY OF THIS CONTRADICTION."

Mira took a deep breath. Her mouth was dry. Her palms were sweaty. She had exactly one chance to get this right, and she'd spent the shuttle ride practicing in front of a mirror until her throat bled.

"The geometry is simple," she said. "The weapon is not a threat. It is a tool. When I speak my apology, I will speak it in your language. My vocal cords are not crystals. The frequencies I produce will be crude, imprecise, and painful. If I make a mistake, even a small one, the harmonic feedback will be catastrophic. The warhead is calibrated to absorb that feedback and convert it into a controlled release of energy. It will hurt. It will hurt me more than it hurts you. But it will not destroy your ship."

Memory-of-the-First-Crack pulsed a deep, sceptical crimson. "YOU HAVE LEARNED OUR LANGUAGE FROM BOOKS. YOU HAVE NEVER SPOKEN IT TO A LIVING CRYSTAL. THE FIRST WORD YOU UTTER WILL CAUSE A TECTONIC TREMOR. THE SECOND WILL CRACK THE DECK. THE THIRD WILL..."

"I know," Mira interrupted. "I've done the math. I've run the simulations. I've practiced until my throat looks like ground beef. I'm not here because I think I can do this perfectly. I'm here because I'm the only human who can do it at all."

She knelt and unstrapped the warhead. Her fingers were shaking, but she forced them steady. She keyed in the activation code

1-9-4-5, the year her grandfather had survived a war that had taught humanity that atomic fire was not a solution but a question and the device began to hum.

"The apology has three parts," she said, standing up. "The first part is for the shattering. The second part is for the fear that led to the shattering. The third part is for the arrogance that made us think we could meet a crystalline species with a handshake and not expect something to break."

She looked at Memory-of-the-First-Crack. At the other six Council members. At Echo-of-Fractures, whose facets had shifted to a worried, flickering orange.

"My name is Mira Kessler," she said. "I am very bad at my job. But I am very good at saying I'm sorry. And I am about to prove it."

She opened her mouth. She found the note in her throat, the high, thin frequency that was the Vex'ilor word for "I" but also carried the harmonic implication of "fragile thing that exists only by permission." She let it out.

The deck shook.

Not a lot. Just a little. A coffee cup would have rattled. A seismograph would have twitched. But every crystal in the chamber dimmed for half a second, as if the entire ship had flinched.

Mira tasted blood. She kept going.

The second syllable was a glottal stop that felt like swallowing a knife. The deck cracked beneath her feet, a thin, hairline fracture that spiderwebbed toward the nearest pillar. The warhead's hum shifted pitch, absorbing the feedback, and Mira felt a jolt of heat race up her legs.

She was halfway through the first part of the apology. Her vision was blurring at the edges. Her throat was on fire.

She did not stop.

The third syllable was a trill that required her to vibrate her tongue at exactly 440 hertz while simultaneously exhaling through

her nose. She had practiced this one six hundred times. She still got it wrong.

The crack in the deck widened. A pillar near the back of the chamber splintered. One of the junior Council members let out a sharp, pained chirp and retreated several meters.

Mira's knees buckled. She caught herself on the warhead, which was now glowing a steady, angry orange.

"Second part," she gasped. "Coming right up."

She found the next note. It was lower, more resonant—the frequency for "fear," which in Vex'ilor was not an emotion but a physical state, the same word used for "crystal under stress." She pronounced it.

The ship groaned. Not the deck this time, the 'ship'. Bulkheads warped. A conduit burst overhead, spraying coolant onto the dais. The warhead beeped frantically and then settled into a low, continuous whine.

Mira's nose was bleeding. She could feel her molars loosening in her gums.

"Third part," she said, and her voice was barely a whisper. "Arrogance."

She looked up at Memory-of-the-First-Crack. The elder's facets had shifted to a pale, curious blue, the colour of uncertainty, of a question not yet answered.

"The word for arrogance," Mira said, "is also the word for 'unearned silence.' It's the sound a crystal makes when it refuses to resonate with its neighbours. It's the frequency of loneliness. And it's the hardest one to pronounce, because you can't fake it. You have to mean it."

She closed her eyes. She thought of her mother, who had begged her not to take this posting. She thought of the deck plate that had betrayed her. She thought of Ambassador Shard-of-Silence, shattered into fourteen thousand pieces, and the way the light had caught each one as it fell.

She opened her mouth and let out a sound that was not a word. It was a confession. It was an admission. It was the raw, unfiltered frequency of a woman who had made a mistake and was willing to die for it.

The warhead detonated.

Not the planet-cracking kind of detonation. The 'polite' kind. A sphere of silent, white light expanded from the device, washing over Mira, over the Council, over the entire chamber. The light carried the frequency of her apology, imperfect, painful, but 'true' and it resonated through every crystal in the ship.

The deck stopped cracking. The pillars stopped splintering. The Council members, one by one, pulsed a soft, steady green.

Memory-of-the-First-Crack spoke. Its voice was quiet, the first quiet thing Mira had heard since she'd boarded the ship.

"HUMAN. YOU HAVE HURT YOURSELF FOR US. YOU HAVE SPOKEN OUR LANGUAGE WITH THE

TONGUE OF A CREATURE THAT SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO SPEAK AT ALL. YOU HAVE MADE A MISTAKE AND OFFERED YOUR LIFE IN EXCHANGE FOR FORGIVENESS."

It paused. The other Council members pulsed in unison.

"THIS IS THE GEOMETRY OF HONOR. WE DID NOT EXPECT IT FROM YOUR SPECIES."

Mira collapsed onto the dais. The warhead was dark now, spent. Her throat felt like she'd swallowed a belt sander. Her nose was still bleeding. She was fairly certain she'd lost at least one tooth.

But she was alive. And the ship was still in one piece. And the Vex'ilor fleet, she realized with a sudden, dizzying relief, was no longer on course for Earth.

"So," she croaked, "truce?"

Memory-of-the-First-Crack pulsed a warm, resonant gold, the colour of agreement, of a bargain sealed.

"TRUCE," it said. "BUT YOUR SPECIES WILL REPLACE OUR AMBASSADOR. AND THE NEXT ONE WILL BE MADE OF STRONGER CRYSTAL."

Mira laughed. It hurt. Everything hurt. But she laughed anyway.

"Deal," she said. "But only if you fix our deck plates. Yours are worse."

The Council, as one, pulsed a colour that the translation implant rendered as "amused exasperation."

It was, Mira decided, close enough to forgiveness.

****

Three weeks later, Mira Kessler stood on the bridge of the 'Carl Sagan's Revenge', watching Earth grow larger in the viewport. Her throat was still bandaged. Her teeth had been replaced with ceramic implants that clicked when she talked. She had a permanent

tremor in her left hand and a scar on her tongue that looked like a tiny map of a country no one had ever visited.

She also had a medal. It was very shiny. She kept it in her sock drawer.

Captain Varma stood beside her, nursing a cup of coffee that was mostly whiskey. "The new Vex'ilor ambassador arrives next week. They're sending a diplomat this time. Not a warrior."

"Good," Mira said. "I'll try not to punch through this one."

"See that you don't. The President has already authorized a new deck plate. It's made of adamantine. You could drop a bomb on it and it wouldn't budge."

Mira smiled. "No challenge in that."

Varma shook his head. "You're insane, Kessler. You know that?"

"Yes, sir. But I'm also the only human who can say 'I'm sorry' in a language that feels like dying. That's got to count for something."

The viewport filled with blue. Ocean. Sky. Clouds. Home.

Mira touched the scar on her tongue and thought about the fourteen thousand pieces of an ambassador she'd carry in her memory for the rest of her life. She thought about the warhead, the apology, the moment the light had washed over her and she'd been certain, absolutely, utterly certain that she was about to die.

She hadn't died. She'd done something harder.

She'd apologized. In a language that didn't have the word. And she'd made them understand.

"Sir," she said, "next time we make first contact with a species that communicates through tectonic violence, can we maybe send someone else?"

Varma took a long sip of his coffee-whiskey. "You're the expert now, Kessler. You're going."

Mira sighed. The deck plate beneath her feet was solid. The ship hummed with the quiet, steady rhythm of a crew that had come home.

She supposed that was enough.

For now. ■

END

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THE WEEPING GAUNTLET

The planet called itself 'Mourn'. Not in any human tongue but in the resonant frequency of a billion nerve-endings firing in unison. Negotiator First-Class Vale Thorne had studied the briefing until her optic nerves ached. The hive-mind, designated 'Polyphème', did not speak in words or images. It spoke in 'pain'. Synchronized, modulated, mathematical agony. To communicate was to suffer. To understand was to endure.

And now, a third party had arrived. The 'Jhorun', a silicon-drift species with the patience of glaciers and the appetite of black holes, had begun stripping Mourn's outer crust for minerals. Polyphème's response had been a planet-wide scream that fried three survey ships. The Confederation wanted peace. Vale wanted a promotion. What she got was a one-way shuttle and a prayer.

"You'll know the Gauntlet when you see it," her handler had said, not looking her in the eye. "Volunteer. Survive. Earn the right to ask for an audience. And Vale... don't 'feel' anything they don't tell you to feel."

She had laughed then. She wasn't laughing now.

****

The sky above Mourn was the colour of a bruise, purple-black with streaks of venous green. Vale's boots touched down on a plain of crystalline lichen that crackled like radio static. No wind. No birds. Just a low, sub-

sonic thrum that vibrated in her molars.

"Negotiator Vale to Confederation Command," she said into her jaw-mic. Static. Then a whisper that wasn't static.

'We hear your bones.'

She swallowed. "I request an audience with Polyphème on matters of mutual survival."

The ground trembled. A fissure opened thirty meters ahead, exhaling a vapour that smelled of burnt copper and almonds. From the fissure rose an archway, if an archway could be made of fused vertebrae and crystallized tears. At its apex, a single eye the size of a dinner plate blinked. Not biological. 'Psychic'. The eye focused on Vale, and she felt her childhood memories being leafed through like a cheap novel.

'You are afraid', the hive-mind observed. Not in words. In a sharp pinch behind her sternum.

"Terrified," she admitted. "But I'm also hungry, late on my taxes, and the only thing standing between your planet and the Jhorun is my expense account. So let's skip the foreplay."

A pause. Then, agreement? It felt like a mild electric shock across her palms.

'The Weeping Gauntlet. Seven trials. Seven pains. Survive all, and you may speak. Fail one, and your identity becomes a new note in our chorus.'

"Catchy," Vale said. "Do I get a map? A sponsor? A stiff drink?"

The eye blinked again. The archway's interior shimmered, revealing a corridor that defied geometry, walls made of weeping faces frozen in stone, floors of broken mirrors, and a ceiling that was simply a void. At the far end, something glowed. A weapon? A key? A lie?

'Begin.'

Vale took a breath. Adjusted her sidearm. Checked her belt of psych-dampeners, tiny lead-lined cylinders that blocked external

emotional bleed. She had twelve. Against a hive-mind that weaponized agony, they were worth less than hope.

"Right," she muttered. "Let's go get eaten by a planet."

****

First step into the corridor. The mirrors beneath her boots didn't break, they 'screamed'. A high, thin shriek of glass-on-glass that resolved into a mocking chorus of her own voice, but pitched an octave higher.

"Vale Thorne, age thirty-one, failed marriage, failed diplomacy exam twice, drinks cheap whiskey, lies to her mother about being happy..."

"Oh, shut up," she said, stepping forward again. The mirror-cracks spread. Each crack was a memory she'd rather forget: the time she froze in a hostage negotiation, the face of the ensign she couldn't save, the look on her father's face when she chose the Service over the family farm.

The psych-dampener on her left hip popped like a champagne cork. Dead.

She kept walking. The laughter grew louder, more intimate. It wasn't just her own voice now. It was her mother's. Her ex-husband's. The instructor who'd said, *"You've got the instincts of a cornered rat, Thorne. Good for surviving. Lousy for living."*

"Is that the best you've got?" she shouted. "I've been insulted by better minds than a glorified fungal network!"

The corridor shuddered. The laughter stopped.

Ahead, the first trap: a pit filled not with spikes, but with 'eyes'. Hundreds of human-looking eyes floating in a viscous fluid, each one blinking independently. To cross, she'd have to walk across a single narrow beam, no handrails, no safety line. And the beam was made of bone.

"Let me guess," she said. "One wrong step, I fall into the peepers and get my mind slurped like a milkshake."

'Correct', the hive-mind pulsed. The pain was a dull throb behind her eyes now. 'But you may use one tool from your belt.'

She looked down at her remaining eleven psych-dampeners. A flash-bang. A grappling hook. A med-kit. And a small, forbidden item she'd smuggled past Confederation customs: a 'memory-wipe injector'. One dose. Erases the last five minutes. Useful if you see something that breaks you.

She grabbed the grappling hook.

"Here's the thing about rats," she said, firing the hook at the far ceiling. It sank into the void with a wet 'thunk'. "They don't walk the tightrope. They cheat."

She swung. The eyes below her blinked faster, hungrier. One brushed her boot and for a half-second, she felt herself 'dissolving', her thoughts becoming their thoughts, her fear becoming a feast.

Then she landed on the far side, gasping. The hook retracted. The eyes hissed.

'Cheating is permitted', Polyphème noted, with something almost like amusement. 'But it accrues interest.'

"Put it on my tab," Vale wheezed.

****

She should have known. The Gauntlet wasn't just physical, it was 'personal'. The second corridor opened into a replica of her old apartment on Titan Station. Same threadbare couch. Same cold coffee. Same ghost.

He sat at the kitchen table. Tall, dark, kind-eyed. Her ex-husband, Jon.

"You're not real," she said.

"I'm real enough," he replied. His voice was perfect. Even the way he said 'enough' like a promise he couldn't keep. "You walked out. You always walk out. The Service. Your pride. Your fear. You never stayed for anything."

"That's not..." She stopped. Because it was true. Partly.

The trap revealed itself: a series of pressure plates on the floor. Each plate, when stepped on, would trigger a psychic replay of a moment she'd hurt someone. Step wrong, and the plate would 'keep' replaying it, on loop, until her mind shattered.

"I don't have time for therapy," she muttered.

"Then don't step," Jon said. "Just sit. Stay. Let the Jhorun take the planet. What's one more thing you failed to save?"

Vale's hand went to her belt. Psych-dampener number two popped. Then number three. She couldn't think with his voice in her ears.

She closed her eyes. Took a step.

The plate beneath her lit up: the day she'd told Jon she was leaving. His face crumpling. Her own cold resolve. The loop began, once, twice, three times in a single second. She felt the guilt like a hot wire in her gut.

"No," she growled. "That's not the whole story."

She took another step. Another memory: the argument about children. Her saying 'not now', him hearing 'never'. The loop tried to lock in, but she forced herself to 'add' to it, the sleepless nights she'd spent wondering

if he was right, the letters she'd written and never sent.

"You don't get to reduce me to my worst moments," she said, stepping faster now. Each plate lit up with a failure and each time, she refused to stop at the pain. She tacked on the aftermath. The learning. The scar-tissue.

By the time she reached the far door, her psych-dampeners were all dead. But she was still herself. Barely.

Jon's ghost smiled sadly. "You always were too stubborn to break."

"Thank you," she said, and meant it. Then she kicked the table aside and walked through.

****

She lost count after the third trial. The one where she had to sing her own eulogy while drowning in a tar pit of other people's regrets. The fourth trial, a maze where every wrong turn made her relive a stranger's death. The fifth, a room full of clocks, each

one ticking down to a moment she'd been afraid, and she had to 'rewind' them by feeling the fear fully, then letting it go.

By the sixth trial, she was crawling. Her left arm was broken; she'd used it to block a psychic shard that wanted to implant a false memory of her mother dying. Her belt was empty. Her mouth tasted of iron and ozone.

The sixth trial's exit opened onto a narrow bridge spanning a chasm of absolute darkness. At the bridge's midpoint stood a figure.

Not Jon. Not her mother.

'Herself.'

A version of Vale with hollow eyes and a slack mouth, wearing a Confederation uniform that was rotting in real time. The hollow-Vale spoke in Polyphème's composite voice.

'You have endured six agonies. One remains. The seventh is not a trap. It is a choice.'

"I'm listening," Vale rasped.

'The Jhorun will crack this planet's core in forty-eight standard hours. We cannot stop them. Our pain can only broadcast, not destroy. But you... you carry a weapon in your blood.'

"I carry a hangover and a bad attitude."

'The psych-dampeners you burned through? They absorbed fragments of our agony. Trace amounts. Your nervous system is now a tuning fork. Step onto this bridge, and we will amplify you. You will become a living scream, one that can shatter the Jhorun's silicon mind-net.'

"And what happens to me?"

'You will feel every death on this planet. Every organism, every thought, every hope. For six seconds. Then your central nervous system will liquefy.'

Vale laughed. It came out wet. "So the weapon is me. And the price is me."

'Yes.'

"And the seventh trial?"

'The choice itself. Step forward to die as a weapon. Step back to live as a failure. The Gauntlet does not judge. It only witnesses.'

The hollow-Vale extended a hand. Behind her, the darkness churned with the shapes of the Jhorun's distant mining vessels, geometric, cold, utterly without malice. They weren't evil. They were 'hungry'. And hunger, Vale knew, was the hardest thing to negotiate with.

She thought of Jon. Her mother. The ensign she couldn't save.

She thought of the first rule of negotiation: 'Never give anything for free.'

"I have a counter-offer," she said.

The hollow-Vale tilted its head.

"You amplify me. I scream. But instead of frying my brain, you 'ride' the scream into the Jhorun's network. You've never left this planet, have you? You've never felt what it's like to 'move'. To 'attack'. To do something other than suffer."

'We do not understand.'

"You will," Vale said, stepping onto the bridge. "Because I'm not your weapon. I'm your 'wings'."

She grabbed the hollow-Vale's hand. The moment she touched it, the planet screamed, not in agony, but in 'recognition'. The hive-mind poured into her like light into a crack. She felt every death, yes. Every birth. Every slow, patient ache of a world that had learned to speak through pain because it had never known another language.

But then she 'pushed'. She showed Polyphème the concept of 'flight'. Of 'outward'. Of 'hunger turned against the hungry'.

The Jhorun's mind-net was vast but slow, silicon dreams, glacial logic. Vale's scream, amplified by a billion nerve-endings, hit them like a supernova of 'fear'. Not their fear. 'Mourn's' fear. The terror of a living world about to be devoured.

The Jhorun had never felt terror before. They didn't have the neural architecture for it. Vale and Polyphème built it for them, brick by agonizing brick.

The mining vessels stopped. Their lights flickered. Then, one by one, they powered down and began to drift, not destroyed, but 'confused'. A species that had never doubted was now drowning in doubt.

Vale collapsed on the bridge. Her nose was bleeding. Her eyes were bleeding. But she was alive.

'We understand', Polyphème whispered. The pain in her chest was gone. In its place something like gratitude. 'You taught us to scream outward.'

"You taught me that pain isn't weakness," she said, coughing. "It's data. Now about that audience."

* * * * * * * * * *

They met in the core of the planet, a cavern of pulsing, iridescent flesh that hummed like a cello string. Vale sat cross-legged on a cushion of nerve tissue. The hive-mind coalesced into a shimmering sphere above her.

'The Jhorun have retreated to the outer belt. They will not return for at least a century. We owe you a debt.'

"I'll take payment in non-aggression pacts and a small land grant for a Confederation listening post," Vale said. "Also, your Gauntlet is a health code violation."

'We find your humour… pleasant. It is like a small, sharp pain.'

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

She filed her report that night from a bioluminescent fungus grove, using a dead Jhorun data-slate she'd salvaged. Command would be furious she'd gone off-script. They'd also promote her. That was the trick of negotiation, give them what they need, not what they want.

As she signed off, Polyphème's voice brushed her mind one last time.

'Negotiator Vale. The Weeping Gauntlet remains open. Should you ever wish to return…'

"To suffer more? No thanks."

'To teach us how to laugh.'

Vale smiled. It hurt, everything hurt but it was a good hurt. The kind you earn.

"Same time next year," she said. "I'll bring whiskey."

And somewhere in the bruise-coloured sky, the first stars came out. Mourn had never seen them before. Vale showed them how to watch without weeping. ■

End.

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RICHARD STANFORD
The Informant
His notebook was full of shorthand transcripts of phone conversations. It had been one of those 'nothing-is-ready-days', panic to deadline, reporters lost in traffic. But they had managed to put the late edition to bed.
The Informant
by Richard Stanford

STOP THE WARS
GIVE EARTH A CHANCE

THE LUNG AND THE STAR

They do not breathe as we breathe. Their atmosphere is methane soup at two hundred Kelvin, and their "lungs" are spiral arrays of crystalline membranes that crack hydrocarbons directly into cellular energy. They find our oxygen hilarious, it burns their tissues on contact and our insistence on exhaling carbon dioxide strikes them as a quaint form of slow suicide.

But they are old. Older than our star's middle age. And they own the only FTL maps that thread the gravitational shoals between the galactic arms without dropping you into a neutron star's lap.

So when the Ghorn ambassador, a three-meter cone of iridescent cartilage that pulsed with slow, peristaltic ripples said, "We require one human lung per map, harvested while the donor lives, screaming if possible," the United Nations did what it always does: wrung its hands, formed a committee, and asked for a definition of "screaming."

Then the star began to fail.

Not our sun, thank God but Proxima's child, the red dwarf that powers the outer colonies. Its neutrino output dropped forty percent in a single month. Without that star's gentle tidal dance, the colonies' fusion reactors would starve, the terraforming fields would freeze, and three billion people would die in the dark.

So they sent me.

****

My name is Porvo Cort and I am already dead.

Not metaphorically. Not poetically. My pulmonary function is thirty-seven percent of a healthy male my age, and that number is dropping by about two percent every hour because the scar tissue from the Ymir Incident keeps spreading like mould on a wet wall. The doctors gave me six months, then three, then "start writing letters."

So when the UN's back-channel man, a weasel named Farnham who smelled of cheap cigars and expensive fear, offered me the Ghorn mission, I laughed until I coughed blood.

"You want me to negotiate with methane-breathing aliens who collect human lungs like trading cards," I said. "And you're sending me because I'm expendable."

Farnham didn't blink. "We're sending you because you have nothing to lose. And because you're the only person in the diplomatic corps who's killed more things than he's shaken hands with."

That was true. Before the lungs went bad, I was a Marine Raider. Six tours. Thirty-seven confirmed kills. One incident on Ymir, a frozen moon where the locals weren't locals but something else, something that wore human skin like a party costume, that left me with a punctured chest and a permanent hatred for anything that breathes different air.

The Ghorn breathe methane. Good. I already hated them.

"One more thing," Farnham said, sliding a small metal sphere across the table. It looked like a ball bearing, cool and heavy. "If the deal goes sour, or if they try to take more than one lung, or if you just feel like it, squeeze this. It's a binary bio-bomb. Targets only Ghorn cellular structures. The vector is a modified bacteriophage that eats their crystalline membranes from the inside out. Fifty-meter kill radius. You'll be fine, it's harmless to humans."

"Harmless," I said. "Like the lung harvest?"

"Like that, yes."

I palmed the sphere and walked to the shuttle.

****

The Ghorn ship hung in high orbit like a black comma against the stars. It was not beautiful. It was functional, a lumpy cylinder studded with radiator fins and what looked like impact craters. Their technology is biological at root, the hull is grown, not built, a chitinous shell that repairs itself and sweats methane to maintain internal pressure.

The docking tube smelled of ammonia and rotten eggs. I wore a full environment suit, of course, my lungs would have liquefied in their atmosphere but the suit's speakers piped in a translation of their speech, which sounded like a glacier cracking underwater.

"Ambassador Cort." The Ghorn diplomat's name was something like 'K'thk'thk'thk' a rhythmic clicking that my translator rendered as "Speaker of the Seventh Spiral." It stood on three tripod legs, its cone body pulsing with slow colour shifts. "You have brought the tribute?"

"I've brought one human lung," I said. "Mine. Harvested live, as requested. But first, we talk about the star maps."

The Speaker's membranes rippled in what I learned later was amusement. "You misunderstand, mammal. The tribute is the price of the negotiation. Without the lung, we do not speak of maps."

I felt the bio-bomb in my suit's thigh pocket. Small. Heavy. Tempting.

"Fine," I said. "But I want the surgical team to do it here, in this room, with me conscious. And I want your chief physician to certify that the lung is healthy or as healthy as mine get."

That gave them pause. Ghorn medicine is excellent, they've been doing organ trades for a million years but they're not used to the donor making demands. The Speaker clicked to a subordinate, a smaller cone that scuttled away and returned with a cluster

of tendrils holding a glittering scalpel made of frozen methane.

"We accept," the Speaker said. "Remove your upper garment and lie on the slab."

The slab was a depression in the floor, warm to the touch; warm for them, which meant about minus one hundred Celsius. My suit's insulation handled it, but I could feel the cold creeping through the joints.

I lay down. A Ghorn physician, if you can call a writhing mass of cilia a physician, hovered over me. Its tendrils were surprisingly gentle as they located my rib spaces through the suit's smart fabric. The suit would part on command, a necessary feature for field medicine. I gave the command.

Cold air hit my chest. My lungs spasmed. I coughed, and the helmet fogged with blood-flecked mist.

"The left lung is compromised," the physician announced. "Scar tissue. Necrotic patches. Unac-

ceptable for tribute."

"Then take the right," I said. "It's still good. Mostly."

The Speaker's membranes flashed amber, alarm or greed, I couldn't tell. "A compromised donor? You came here to cheat us?"

"I came here to trade," I said. "You want a live human lung. I have two, one of which is dying anyway. The right lung is prime, no scar tissue, full function, good for another forty years in a methane tank. Take it, and we talk maps. Or I walk, and you explain to your superiors why you turned down the only human stupid enough to volunteer."

Silence. The Ghorn are not stupid, they're just literal. The concept of a dying man offering his best organ as leverage was outside their experience. They think in terms of strength and longevity. A donor with a death sentence was like a broken tool: useless.

But a lung is a lung.

"Proceed," the Speaker said.

****

The surgery took eleven minutes.

I will not describe it in detail. Let me say only that Ghorn anaesthesia is a methane-based aerosol that doesn't work on human nerves, so I felt everything, the cold scalpel, the spreading of ribs, the slow, sucking release of pressure as my right lung was detached from its moorings. I screamed. Not heroically. Not stoically. I screamed like a child with a splinter, because that's what pain does, it strips away the soldier, the diplomat, the man, and leaves only the animal.

When it was over, the physician held up my lung in a crystalline jar. It was pink and glistening, still twitching with residual nerve impulses. Beautiful, in a horrible way.

"The tribute is accepted," the Speaker said. "We will now discuss the star maps."

I sat up, slowly, one hand pressed to the wound that the suit was already sealing with emergency foam and coughed. No blood. That was the left lung's job now, and it was working triple time.

"Maps," I said. "Proxima's child. The red dwarf. It's failing. We need the gravitational bypass data to reach the core and restart fusion."

The Speaker's membranes pulsed a slow, deep blue, thoughtfulness. "We know of your star's illness. It is not an illness. It is a harvest."

I blinked. "A harvest?"

"Your star is young, but its core contains a rare isotope, Ghorn call it 'k'thak', humans might call it stabilized neutronium. It forms only in red dwarfs of a certain age. We have been mining it for ten thousand years. The neutrino drop is a side effect of our extraction."

I felt the bio-bomb in my pocket. My fingers twitched.

"You're killing our star," I said. "On purpose."

"We are harvesting a resource," the Speaker corrected. "Your colonies are incidental. If you wish the mining to stop, you must provide compensation equal to the lost 'k'thak'. Approximately one million human lungs."

I laughed. It turned into a cough, which turned into a wet, rattling breath. "We don't have a million volunteers."

"Then you will find another star. Or you will die. The choice is yours."

* * * * * * * * * *

I had seventeen minutes left.

The bio-bomb's timer, my timer, was set to trigger twenty minutes after the lung harvest. That was the deal I'd made with myself, twenty minutes to negotiate, and if they wouldn't save my people, I'd kill them all and let the colonies find another way.

But now I had new information. They weren't just withholding

maps—they were actively killing our star. And a million lungs was a joke. We didn't have a million prisoners, a million death-row inmates, a million anything.

"Speaker," I said, "what if I offered you something better than lungs?"

"There is nothing better."

"What about the thing that's killing me?" I tapped my chest. "The scar tissue. The necrotic patches. It's not a disease, it's a biological weapon. We call it the Ymir Factor. It's a prion-like protein that cross-links with Ghorn crystalline membranes. One exposure and your entire species could be extinct inside a decade."

The Speaker's membranes went white ...fear. "You lie."

"I don't lie," I said. "I'm a dying ex-soldier with nothing to lose. Why would I lie?" I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bio-bomb but I didn't squeeze it. I held it up so the light caught its smooth surface. "This is a delivery system. I squeeze it, and the Ymir Factor aerosolizes in your ship's atmosphere. Fifty-meter radius. Your whole delegation dies. But more importantly, the prion returns to your homeworld with your corpses. Your membranes will crystallize and shatter within six months."

The Speaker's cilia twitched wildly. "You would commit genocide to save three billion humans?"

"No," I said. "I'd commit genocide to save three billion humans from a species that harvests stars and demands lungs as tribute. There's a difference."

Silence. The Ghorn physician had stopped tending to my chest wound. The subordinate cones had frozen mid-scuttle. The only sound was my breathing, shallow, fast, each inhale a small victory.

"What do you want?" the Speaker asked.

"Three things. First: stop the mining. Immediately. Your extraction teams have twenty-four hours to clear out of Proxima's

core, or the next human envoy won't bother negotiating, they'll just drop a singularity bomb down the gravity well and take you with us."

"That would destroy the star entirely."

"Yes," I said. "It would. Second thing: you give us the FTL maps. All of them. Not just the ones to Proxima's core, the whole network. Third thing, you provide medical data on Ghorn tissue regeneration. Your membranes heal faster than anything in human biology. If we can adapt that to human lungs, maybe I live. Maybe a lot of us live."

The Speaker's membranes cycled through a rainbow of colours, anger, fear, calculation, finally a dull gray that the translator labelled "resigned acceptance."

"We agree to the maps and the medical data," the Speaker said. "The mining cannot stop immediately; the extraction is a process that takes weeks to reverse safely. But we will begin deceleration within the hour."

"And the lungs?"

"We waive the tribute for this negotiation. Keep your remaining lung, Porvo Cort. You have earned it."

I grinned. It hurt. "One more thing."

"What?"

I held up the bio-bomb. "This isn't a Ymir Factor delivery system. It's a binary bio-bomb that targets Ghorn cellular structures. It's harmless to humans, but it'll kill everyone in this room if I squeeze it. And I'm still holding it."

The Speaker's membranes went black, absolute terror.

"So here's the deal," I said. "You give me your word, your species' equivalent of a blood oath, whatever that is, that you'll honour our agreement. And then I don't squeeze. And we both walk away. Or float away. Whatever."

"You would trust my word?"

"No," I said. "But I trust your

self-interest. Killing you won't save my star. Keeping you alive might. So give me the word."

The Speaker was silent for a long moment. Then its membranes pulsed a single, steady gold, the colour of truth, the translator said.

"You have my word," the Speaker said. "The Seventh Spiral does not break its oaths. It is… inefficient."

I put the bio-bomb back in my pocket.

"Pleasure doing business with you," I said. "Now patch up my chest and give me those maps. I've got a star to save and a lung to keep."

****

They gave me the maps on a crystalline data slug, cool and heavy as the bio-bomb had been. The medical data came separately, a thick slurry of genetic code and membrane-growth factors that our biochemists would spend years decoding.

The mining deceleration began forty-seven minutes after I left the Ghorn ship. The neutrino output stabilized within a week. The outer colonies would survive.

As for me ...well, the Ghorn tissue-regeneration data turned out to be the real prize. Our doctors synthesized a growth factor that stopped the scar-tissue spread within a month and began rebuilding my left lung from the inside out. I breathe now at eighty-three percent of normal. Not bad for a dead man.

Farnham asked me, six months later, if I'd do it again.

"Do what?" I said. "Get my lung cut out by a methane-breathing alien while holding a bomb I wasn't sure would work?"

"Yes. That."

I took a long, slow breath, deep, full, no cough and looked out the viewport at Proxima's child, burning steady and warm.

"In a heartbeat," I said. "As long as I got to keep the other lung."

He laughed. I laughed. And somewhere in the dark between stars, the Ghorn Seventh Spiral filed a report that said, in effect. 'Do not negotiate with humans. They are insane, and they do not scream prettily.'

But that's all right. We got the maps. We got the star. And I got to breathe.

That's a fair trade. ■

End

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THE DANCE OF THE RAZOR-WINGED QUEEN

They called it the Static. For three days, every radio telescope from Arecibo to the new lunar array picked up a single, pulsating frequency, 2.4 gigahertz, the same band as a microwave oven, but modulated with a complexity that made human encryption look like cave paintings. The United Nations convened an emergency session. The consensus: intelligent life. The sub-consensus: panicked gibberish.

Then the Swarm arrived.

Not ships. Not beams of green light. A trillion bodies, each the size of a fingernail, riding the solar wind like a living nebula. They descended on Mars first, spun the red planet into a glittering cocoon of chitin and silk. Three days later, Phobos and Deimos were gone. Eaten. Recycled into more of 'them'.

Earth's admirals wet their lips and prayed. The Secretary-General, a former lawyer with the spine of a jellyfish, broadcast a greeting in seventeen languages. The Swarm answered by reassembling the wreckage of a Chinese space station into a perfect geometric sphere and dropping it onto Geneva. Not an attack, the xenobiologists insisted. A gift. A demonstration of capability.

The diplomats flew in. Smiling, sweating, carrying briefcases full of trade proposals and cultural exchange programs. They landed on the Swarm's primary hive, a pulsating mound the size of Belgium, anchored in the South Pacific. The Swarm's drones escorted them inside. What happened

next is classified above the level of god.

What leaked out, the lead diplomat, a silver-tongued Harvard man named Aldrich P. Heston, tried to shake the Queen's forelimb. The Queen interpreted the motion as a mating challenge. Her response was to release a cloud of pheromones that turned every male diplomat within a mile into a gibbering, self-castrating wreck. Heston made it back to the helicopter missing both ears and his sense of irony.

The Swarm's message, finally translated by a terrified linguist, 'Dance or die.'

That's when they called me.

****

My name is Jonas Thorne. Former Ambassador to the Kuiper Belt Collective, former husband to a woman who divorced me by laser-comms from Titan, and current owner of the worst bar on Ganymede, The Rusty Hatch, where the drinks are watered and the gravity's set to 0.3g so the patrons can't throw punches hard enough to break the recyclers.

I was nursing a glass of synth-whiskey and watching a methane-breather from Europa try to seduce a carbon-silicon lifeform from Callisto (they were both drunk and it was going about as well as you'd expect) when the door hissed open and three men in UN blacksuits walked in. They had the look of people who'd never had a good time in their lives. Clean-shaven, hard-eyed, and carrying briefcases that were probably also guns.

The lead one scanned the room, spotted me, and walked over. He didn't sit. "Jonas Thorne?"

"Last time I checked." I took a sip. "You selling something? Because I don't buy. And I don't rent."

He opened the briefcase. Inside, not a gun, a holographic projector. It flickered to life, showing a rotating image of the Swarm's Queen. She was beautiful in the way a chainsaw is beautiful: segmented body the size of a hippo,

six obsidian legs, a thorax that shimmered like oil on water, and two sets of wings, the upper pair translucent, the lower pair serrated like steak knives. Her head was a crown of compound eyes, each facet a different colour. And her antennae, oh Lord, her antennae, they moved in a constant, hypnotic spiral, as if she were conducting an invisible orchestra.

"The Swarm has destroyed the Panama Canal," the blackshirt said. "Replaced it with a living bridge of interlocked bodies. They have converted the Sahara into a nursery the size of France. And last Tuesday, they danced the entire population of Madagascar into a trance and walked them into the sea."

"They didn't drown," the second blackshirt added. "The Swarm built gills for them. They're down there now, singing hymns to the Queen."

I set down my glass. "So what's the problem? Sounds like they're improving real estate values."

The lead blackshirt's jaw tightened. "Ambassador Heston's second attempt at negotiation resulted in the Queen interpreting his bow as a threat display. She sent a swarm of razor-winged assassins after the delegation. Seventeen dead. Heston's in a coma."

"Pity. I liked his shoes." I stood up. "What do you want from me?"

"You were the only diplomat to ever make peaceful contact with a non-humanoid intelligence. The Kuiper Belt Collective still sends you a fruit basket every year."

"The Collective are silicon-based rocks with the emotional range of a spreadsheet. They don't dance. They don't mate. They just calculate. This is different."

"That's why we need you." The third blackshirt, who hadn't spoken until now, pulled out a data slate. "We've cracked more of their language. The Queen's mating dance is a sequence of forty-seven movements, each with a specific chemical and kinetic

signature. Get one wrong, and her bodyguards, the razor-wings, remove your head. Get them all right, and she… bonds with you. Chemically, neurologically, completely. She'll do anything for her mate."

"Including not turning Earth into a planetary snack bar?"

"Including that."

I laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh. "So you want me to seduce a giant insect. With a dance. And if I trip, I get filleted by flying razor blades."

"You'll have a week to train. We've got the best choreographers from the Bolshoi and the Royal Ballet. And Dr. Aris Thorne, no relation, will handle the pheromone synthesis."

I froze. "Aris?"

"Your ex-wife. Yes." The blackshirt didn't blink. "She's the world's leading expert on insect neurochemistry. She's already onsite."

I looked around my bar. The methane-breather had given up on the carbon-silicon and was now trying to eat a barstool. The recyclers hummed their sad, tired hum. It wasn't much of a life. But it was mine.

"Double my usual fee," I said. "And I want a bottle of real whiskey. Not synth. The kind from Kentucky before the fire."

"Done."

"And a parachute."

"Why?"

"Because if I'm going to die, I want to do it falling."

* * * * * * * * * *

The training was hell.

They flew me to a secret base in the Andes—a converted monastery where the monks had been relocated to a nicer place in Peru. The dance floor was a pressure-sensitive grid that measured every step, every tilt, every microsecond of hesitation. The choreographers, a pair of identical twins named Sergei and Sergei, had the warmth of a tax audit.

"No, no, no," Sergei One said, slapping my left shoulder. "The fourth movement, the 'antennal flourish' must be accompanied by a release of pheromone 7-Gamma. You are moving like a constipated walrus."

"I'm human," I growled. "We don't have pheromone glands on our antennae because we don't have antennae."

"Dr. Thorne has synthesized a wearable diffuser," Sergei Two said, pointing to a harness that looked like a torture device from the Spanish Inquisition. "It will mist the correct chemicals at each step. But the movements must be precise. The Queen can detect a millisecond of lag."

I strapped on the harness. It pinched. It sprayed. It made me smell like a rosebush in heat.

For seven days, I danced. I danced until my knees screamed and my back clicked like a Geiger counter. I learned the *thoracic shimmy* (a hip wiggle that would make Elvis jealous), the 'wing-flick salute' (a shoulder roll that required dislocating levels of flexibility), and the 'abdomen curl' (which is exactly as dignified as it sounds). Dr. Aris Thorne watched from a glass booth, taking notes, occasionally adjusting the pheromone mix. She hadn't spoken to me directly since the divorce. Her silence was louder than any insult.

On the eighth day, they dropped me into the South Pacific.

****

The hive rose from the ocean like a black mountain. Up close, it wasn't static, it 'pulsed'. A trillion bodies crawling over each other, building, repairing, communicating. The sound was a low, wet hum that vibrated in my teeth. The helicopter pilot gave me a thumbs-up that looked more like a goodbye wave. I jumped.

The water was warm and thick with organic debris. I swam through a tunnel of interlocked drones; they parted for me, their compound eyes tracking my every stroke. The harness sprayed pheromone 1-Alpha 'approach, non-threat'. They let me pass.

The inner chamber was the size of a cathedral. Bioluminescent globes hung from the ceiling; actually, they 'were' the ceiling, a living membrane of glowing drones. The floor was carpeted with shed wings, soft as silk. And at the far end, on a dais of compressed chitin, sat the Queen.

She was bigger than the hologram suggested. Much bigger. Her abdomen alone was the size of a subway car, and it moved with a slow, rhythmic pulse, the heartbeat of the Swarm. Her eyes, all ten thousand of them, fixed on me. Her antennae stopped spiralling. They pointed forward, rigid.

The razor-wings descended from the ceiling. A thousand of them, each the size of a dinner plate, wings buzzing at a frequency that made my fillings ache. They formed a perfect circle around me, edges glinting.

The Queen spoke. Not with sound, with vibrations. I felt her words in my sternum.

'DANCE.'

No pressure.

I began.

Movement one 'The Greeting Stance'. Feet shoulder-width apart, arms raised at a forty-five-degree angle, palms up.

The harness sprayed pheromone 2-Beta. The Queen's antennae twitched. Good.

Movement two 'The Antennal Approach'. I stepped forward, tilting my head side to side in a figure-eight pattern. My neck screamed. The razor-wings tightened their circle.

Movement three 'The Thoracic Shimmy'. I wiggled my hips, rotating my torso in a wave that started at my shoulders and ended at my belt. Sergei would have been proud. The Queen's abdomen pulsed faster.

Movement four 'The Wing-Flick Salute'. I rolled my shoulders, snapped my arms out and ...crack. Something in my right shoulder gave. Pain lanced down my arm. I almost broke the pose. Almost.

The razor-wings stopped buzzing. They tilted, as if evaluating.

I held. I breathed. I finished the salute with my left arm only. Not perfect. But not a failure.

Movement five through twenty:

a blur of sweat, pheromone mist, and desperate hope. I shimmied. I curled. I flourished my imaginary antennae. The Queen began to sway with me, her massive body undulating like a cobra. The razor-wings retreated to the walls. I was doing it. I was actually...

Movement twenty-one 'The Abdomen Presentation'. I turned my back to the Queen, bent at the waist, and arched my spine. The harness was supposed to spray pheromone 9-Delta, the chemical signal for 'receptivity'. Instead, it sputtered. Then it hissed. Then it sprayed me directly in the face with something that smelled like burning tires.

I gagged. My eyes watered. I stumbled, caught myself on one knee and looked up.

The Queen's antennae went straight up. A sign of extreme distress.

The razor-wings descended.

****

Time slows down when you're about to die. I had just enough of it to think, 'Aris, you brilliant, vengeful woman. You sabotaged the harness.'

Then I did the only thing that made sense. I laughed.

Not a polite laugh. A full-belly, tears-streaming, oh-God-I'm-screwed laugh. The kind you laugh when the universe has made its joke and you're the punchline.

The razor-wings stopped. Three inches from my face. Their wings buzzed in confusion.

The Queen tilted her head. A gesture that, in any species, means 'what the hell?'

I stood up slowly. I wiped the chemical spray from my eyes. And I started dancing again, not the choreographed routine, but something new. Something human. I did the twist. I did the mashed potato. I did a clumsy, off-beat, utterly ridiculous shimmy that would have gotten me kicked out of any nightclub in the solar system.

And I talked. Because if you can't dance right, you can at least talk.

"Look," I said, breathless, "I don't know what your last boyfriend was like. But I'm guessing he had six legs and didn't make stupid jokes. I'm not your species. I'm not your size. I can't even fly. But I showed up. I tried. And I'm still here, which is more than most people can say after a week of Sergei and Sergei."

The Queen's antennae lowered. Slowly. Curiously.

The razor-wings retreated to the walls.

I kept dancing. Badly. Enthusiastically. I did the robot. I did a move I learned from a drunken Martian trader that involved spinning on one heel and clapping my hands over my head. I sang ...badly, the chorus of an old Earth sea shanty.

And then, miracle of miracles, the Queen began to move with me.

Not the precise, lethal dance of her species. Something looser. Something… playful. Her abdomen pulsed in time with my clapping. Her antennae spiralled in lazy loops. And from her thorax came a sound, a low, rumbling purr that vibrated through the floor and up my legs.

She was laughing. Or the insect equivalent.

I danced until my legs gave out. I collapsed onto the soft wing-carpet, gasping, grinning like an idiot. The Queen lowered her massive head until one of her compound eyes—a beautiful, faceted thing like a stained-glass window, was level with mine.

She vibrated a single word:

'AGAIN.'

I reached up and, very gently, touched her antenna. The harness was dead, but I didn't need it anymore. "Again," I agreed. "But next time, you lead."

****

They built a permanent embassy on the edge of the hive. I live there now, in a small room with a view of the pulsing walls. The Queen visits every evening. We dance. Not the lethal kind, the silly kind. She's learned the twist. She's terrible at it. I love it.

The Swarm stopped eating cities. Instead, they've started building them, living structures that grow and repair themselves, powered by sunlight and the Queen's gentle hum. Earth's economy is in chaos, but in a good way. No more oil. No more concrete. Just chitin and silk and a trillion small, hard-working bodies.

Aris sent me a message last week. One line: 'The pheromone sabotage was a test. You passed. Don't expect a second chance.'

I didn't reply. Some dances are better left unfinished.

The razor-wings still circle the embassy. But they've stopped buzzing. Now they just watch, their blades sheathed, their many eyes glittering with something that might be respect.

Or amusement.

Hard to tell with insects.

But that's diplomacy for you. Sometimes you win by losing. Sometimes you make peace by making a fool of yourself. And sometimes, just sometimes, the universe gives you a second

chance, not because you deserve it, but because you laughed when you should have died.

I pour myself a glass of real Kentucky whiskey. The Queen hums outside my window. And I think, 'Not bad for a disgraced bartender.'

Then I get up, stretch my aching back, and start to dance.

Alone, for now.

But not for long. ■

The End

THE SEVENTH TRUTH

Neutral asteroid XB-4392 had no air, no law, and no gravity to speak of. But it had a treaty. The treaty said, 'When humans and Xix'thar meet on dead rock, you may shoot first, but after every bullet, you must speak one truthful sentence.'

The humans called it the Honesty Clause. The Xix'thar called it 'k'thak va'thral' "the throat's last joke." Both sides hated it. Both sides kept it. Because the alternative was war in the inner planets, and nobody wanted that.

Not yet.

****

The airlock cycled with a sound like a sick cat. Inside, the conference chamber was a half-sphere carved into nickel-iron, lit by emergency strips that flickered at different frequencies, human vision on one side, reptilian infrared on the other. In the middle, a polished slab of basalt served as a table. On it: two water bottles, one thermos of blood-warm nutrient broth for the Xix'thar and twelve guns.

Commander Elena Vasquez counted them. Six coil pistols on her side. Six plasma casters on theirs. Her team wore hard-vacuum tactical gear, helmets sealed, voice relays set to diplomatic band. The Xix'thar wore nothing but their own scales and a kind of ceremonial harness that held extra power cells for their sidearms.

The lead Xix'thar, Ambassador Ssithra-Va, tilted her head 120

degrees to the left, a gesture of amusement. Her eyes were vertical slits, orange as a dying star. She said, "Human Commander. You are late. Four point three seconds."

"Traffic," Vasquez said.

"Lies are permitted before the first shot," Ssithra-Va said. "After, no."

"I know the rules," Vasquez said. "I wrote half of them."

"You wrote the half about truth. We wrote the half about bullets." Ssithra-Va's mouth split in what humans called a smile but was actually a threat display. "We find your half inefficient. But poetic."

From behind Vasquez, a quiet voice said, "Ma'am, her third epaulet scale is rotated. That's a dominance marker. She intends to draw first."

That was Jan Mikkelsen, the translator. Young, pale, with the kind of face that looked like it had been assembled from spare parts. He had spent three years on the Xix'thar homeworld, learning their eighteen grammatical moods and the forty-two ways a single hiss could mean 'yes', 'no', 'maybe', or 'I am about to eat your liver'. The Corps didn't trust him. The diplomats envied him. The Xix'thar, oddly, found him amusing.

Vasquez trusted him enough. "Noted."

She sat. The Xix'thar sat, which for them was a folding of the lower body into a tripod stance, tails coiled for balance. The basalt table floated between them, held down by magnetic clamps.

"We are here to discuss the border incursion at 67-Orionis," Vasquez began.

"No," Ssithra-Va said. "We are here to establish which of us leaves this asteroid alive. The incursion is a symptom. The disease is your species' continued existence."

Silence.

Mikkelsen leaned close to

Vasquez's helmet mic. "She's not joking. That's the plain-tense declarative. She means it literally."

"I heard her," Vasquez said. Then, louder: "Ambassador, if this is a killing ground, why the treaty? Why the truth?"

Ssithra-Va's second-in-command, a smaller Xix'thar named Vessk, spoke for the first time. His voice was a dry rasp. "Because lies are a human weapon. Truth is ours. We want you to die knowing the truth."

And he drew.

****

The plasma caster hummed. Vessk fired before anyone could blink. The bolt went wide intentionally, scorching the wall two meters left of Vasquez's head. Warning shot. Courtesy, of a sort.

The echo died. Then the rule kicked in.

Vessk's throat sac pulsed. "Truth," he said. "My species does not feel pain as yours does. We register injury as information."

Vasquez didn't hesitate. She drew her coil pistol, aimed at the basalt table between them, and fired. The round ricocheted into the ceiling. Her turn.

"Truth," she said. "Humanity has planted fission bombs on three of your colony worlds. They will detonate if we do not return from this meeting within seventy-two hours."

The Xix'thar froze. All six of them. That kind of stillness wasn't tactical, it was genuine shock. Even Ssithra-Va's tail stopped coiling.

"You bluff," she whispered.

"Truth," Vasquez said. "Can't bluff now. Read my face."

Mikkelsen translated the facial muscle movements into Xix'thar subsonics automatically, his jaw working silently. The Xix'thar heard the confirmation. Their scales rippled.

Ssithra-Va drew. Fast. Fired at Vasquez's thigh. The shot grazed armour melted a groove in the ceramic. Vasquez grunted but didn't fall.

"Truth," Ssithra-Va said. "We knew about the bombs. We have had agents inside your command structure for eleven years."

Vasquez's blood went cold. She looked at her own team. Three soldiers. One translator. One diplomat. Could any of them be a plant? She didn't know. That was the horror of the truth rule, you couldn't unhear it.

She fired back. A deliberate miss. "Truth. I don't know which of my people are yours. But I know one of them is."

Mikkelsen's eyes widened. He hadn't known that. Neither had the soldiers. Suddenly, everyone was looking at everyone else.

The Xix'thar ambassador's turn. She didn't fire. Instead, she holstered her caster and laughed, a sound like gravel in a blender.

"Truth," she said. "Your translator, Jan Mikkelsen, is not a spy. He is worse. He is a variable we did not account for."

Now all eyes turned to Mikkelsen.

He swallowed. "Me?"

"You," Ssithra-Va said. "You learned our language. You lived among us. You know our syntax. But you do not know what we are."

Mikkelsen's hand drifted to his own sidearm, a small holdout pistol, unauthorized. "I know you're bilateral hermaphrodites. I know you moult every seven years. I know you can regenerate limbs."

"Truth," Vessk hissed. "All true. But you do not know the lie inside the truth."

* * * * * * * * * *

The room had gone still again, but differently now. The stillness of a held breath. The basalt table reflected the emergency lights like a dark mirror.

Commander Vasquez broke it. She raised her coil pistol, aimed between Ssithra-Va's eyes, and fired.

The round stopped three centimeters from the ambassador's forehead. A personal shield, invisible until now, flickered blue.

"Truth," Vasquez said. "I just tried to kill you because I'd rather end this now than hear whatever comes next."

Ssithra-Va didn't flinch. She reached up, plucked the flattened slug from the air where it hung against the shield, and dropped it on the table.

"Truth," she said. "You cannot kill me. Not with that weapon. Not on this asteroid. Because I am not real."

Vasquez stared. "What?"

"Truth. I am a projection. A remote-operated biological puppet. My real body is light-seconds away, aboard a warship. This body can die. I cannot."

The human soldiers shifted.

One of them, Corporal Denny, raised his gun toward the door, as if expecting an assault team.

"Hold," Vasquez ordered. Then, to Ssithra-Va: "Why tell us that? That's a tactical disadvantage."

"Truth," Ssithra-Va said. "Because the rule compels me. And because you are about to learn something that will break your mind."

She nodded at Vessk. Vessk drew, fired into the floor. The shot melted a hole through the nickel-iron, revealing vacuum below. Air began to whistle out, slowly. The magnetic seals on the room's joints held, but the pressure dropped a fraction.

"Truth," Vessk said. "We Xix'thar do not reproduce sexually. We do not moult. We do not regenerate. Those are lies we have told for forty years."

Mikkelsen's face went white. "That's... I've seen you moult. I've dissected corpses. I've written papers."

"Truth," Vessk said. "You have seen what we wanted you to see. The bodies you dissected were genetically engineered decoys. The moulting was staged. The regeneration was synthetic tissue seeded with nanites."

"Then what are you?" Mikkelsen's voice cracked.

Ssithra-Va answered. "Truth. We are a hive intelligence. Each 'individual' you see is a remotely operated unit, like this one. The real Xix'thar are sessile brain masses, rooted in the core of our homeworld. We have no bodies. We have never had bodies. We invented the reptilian form to negotiate and to frighten."

Silence. The air was getting thin. Vasquez felt her helmet's oxygen reserves kick in.

"Why?" she asked. "Why the lie?"

"Truth," Ssithra-Va said. "Because if you knew we were immobile, you would have bombed our planet from orbit decades ago. The lie of the warrior race

kept you at the negotiation table. Kept you shooting, talking, bleeding. Kept you distracted."

Mikkelsen's hand was shaking now. He pointed his holdout pistol at Ssithra-Va. Not firing. Just pointing.

"Then the real war," he said slowly, "hasn't started."

Ssithra-Va's puppet smiled. "Truth. The real war begins when we stop pretending to be what we are not. When we release the drones we have been building inside your asteroid belt. When we stop talking and start consuming."

Vasquez fired. Not at the ambassador, at the table. The basalt split. The magnets failed. The table floated up, spinning slowly.

"Truth," she said. "I have a deadman's switch on my heart. If I die here, every human ship in the sector gets your real coordinates and a launch order for planet-crackers."

Ssithra-Va's eyes narrowed. "You would kill billions of our sessile forms?"

"Truth," Vasquez said. "In a heartbeat."

* * * * * * * * * *

But the rule wasn't done. It was Vessk's turn. He holstered his caster. Stepped forward. Pressed his forehead against Vasquez's helmet.

"Truth," he whispered, and the suit's external mics picked it up for everyone. "Your deadman's switch is a lie. We disabled it when we scanned you entering the airlock. You have no power here."

Vasquez's hand flew to her chest. The subcutaneous implant, she couldn't feel it. Couldn't tell if it was still there.

Mikkelsen grabbed her arm. "Commander, don't... don't react. They're playing on uncertainty. They don't know if it's disabled either. They're guessing."

"Truth," Ssithra-Va said. "We are not guessing. We are certain."

"Truth," Mikkelsen said suddenly, without firing a shot and everyone froze because 'that wasn't his turn'. "My truth. I am not a translator. I am a xeno-neurologist. I was sent here to study your brain patterns under stress. And I have just realized something."

The Xix'thar puppets turned to him in unison. Creepy.

"What?" Ssithra-Va demanded.

Mikkelsen's face broke into a grin. It was the grin of a man who had just found the last piece of a puzzle he hadn't known he was solving.

"Truth," he said. "You can't lie. The rule forces truth. But you've been lying for forty years about your biology. That means the rule doesn't apply to you the same way. You've been speaking 'grammatically' truthful sentences that are 'factually' false because your definition of 'truth' is different."

The Xix'thar went very still.

"You don't feel pain as information," Mikkelsen continued. "That was true by 'your' standard because your sessile brains don't feel anything. The puppets feel nothing. You 'are' nothing but a pattern of electrochemical signals in a rock. Your 'truth' is just internal consistency, not correspondence to external reality."

Ssithra-Va's puppet twitched. "That is..."

"Truth?" Mikkelsen laughed. "No. That's a human truth. And I just weaponized it."

He raised his holdout pistol, aimed not at a Xix'thar but at the emergency lighting control box on the wall, and fired. The lights died. Infrared flickered. Human vision went dark.

In the sudden black, Mikkelsen said, "Truth. The human bombs on your colony worlds are fake. We never planted them. That was a lie the Commander told as her first truth and you didn't catch it because you don't understand human bluffing. You think truth is a fact. We think truth is a 'move'."

The lights came back on, jury-rigged by one of Vasquez's soldiers. The Xix'thar puppets stood motionless. Their orange eyes flickered, recalibrating.

Vasquez looked at Mikkelsen. "You little bastard. You're insane."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "But I'm also correct. They can't process recursive bluffing. Their 'truth' system is binary. Ours is game-theoretic. We just won."

Ssithra-Va's puppet raised a hand. Not to fire. To signal.

"Truth," she said, and her voice was different now, flat, mechanical. "We concede this engagement. Not the war. This engagement. Your species is more irrational than we calculated. Irrationality is a tactical advantage we did not account for."

She turned to Vessk. "Recall the drones."

"Truth," Vessk said. "Recalling."

The puppets' eyes went dark. One by one, they collapsed, their internal power cells cycling down. The remote operators had severed connection.

The room was very quiet. Air still leaking. Vasquez sealed the floor breach with a patch from her belt.

She turned to Mikkelsen. "Explain. Now."

He sat down on the floating basalt chunk. "Commander, the Xix'thar aren't liars. They're 'unable' to lie in the human sense. Their truth is syntactic. Ours is semantic. We've been playing two different games and calling it the same treaty. When I said their biology lies were 'false by human standards' that wasn't a truth. It was a 'performative' truth. A speech act. They couldn't reject it because their processing doesn't have a category for 'performative.' So they had to accept it as binding."

Vasquez stared. "You confused them into surrendering?"

"I confused them into 'recalculating'," Mikkelsen said. "The war isn't over. It hasn't started. But now they know we fight with words as much as bullets. And that's a war they might lose."

****

Three days later, aboard the human flagship 'Ulysses', Mikkelsen sat in debriefing. Admiral Okonkwo was old, scarred, and didn't smile.

"You're saying the Xix'thar are immobile brain masses living inside a planet?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"And they've been puppeting lizard bodies for forty years?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you beat them by telling them a lie that wasn't a lie because of grammar?"

Mikkelsen paused. "Truth," he said. Then grinned. "No. I beat them by understanding that the first rule of warfare hasn't changed since the Stone Age."

The Admiral raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

"Know your enemy," Mikkelsen said. "Not his weapons. Not his tactics. His *truth*."

The Admiral leaned back. "And what's our truth?"

Mikkelsen looked out the viewport at the cold stars. "That we're still here. Still talking. Still shooting when we have to. And still

crazy enough to win."

Outside, the asteroid belt turned slowly. Somewhere in the dark, sessile minds dreamed of drones and conquest. Somewhere else, a translator cleaned his pistol and practiced a language no human had ever spoken.

The real war hadn't started.

But the first truth had been fired.

And the seventh, the one nobody had said aloud, hung in the vacuum like a bullet waiting for a target, 'Both sides were lying about being truthful.'

'Both sides were right.' ■

The End

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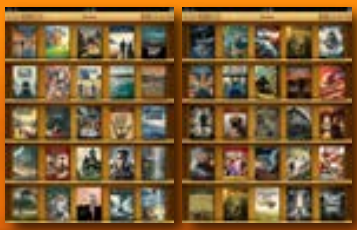

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